

Bishop Henry's Address – Our Lady of Grace Anniversary Mass

Many years ago, when I was a young Seminarian I worked during the summers at Labatt's in London brewery. It was one of the best jobs I ever had in my whole life, until I became Bishop. Well one of the benefits of Labatt's was not only did they pay you well; the side benefits were pretty good. Because they had an employee's bar and after you were finished working you were allowed to go have 2 free beers. But the most important thing I remember about Labatt's was the parking lot. And the reason I remember the parking lot so well was occasionally my father would let me use the car when I was on the midnight shift and I would drive into the parking lot at Labatt's and as soon as you would get there they had the front section reserved for those who worked there for 25 years. And even though very frequently on the night shift it was empty I would drive past that section and park at the end of the parking lot and I would walk back past that 25-year section and I'd shake my head and say, *"My goodness, those guys are OLD! Isn't it thoughtful that the company would shorten their walk just so they won't have a heart attack walking from the parking lot to the brewery?"*

I mention that story because 25 years can seem like a long time or it can seem like a very, very short time. I think it depends upon your age and the way in which you look at things. If I were to ask some of the young people here how old their teacher is in school, they'll tell me "Oh she's 100!" now we know that's not the case but they kind of think someone who is older than them is really, really old. Much like I thought those who worked at Labatt's for 25 years were ancient. However now I look at such things as "oh my gosh, 25 years it goes by in no time at all!" But one of the ways of perhaps of capturing and appreciating 25 years as Our Lady of Grace parish is just to pause and think for a moment about the sacred space we're in today.

SUCH A HOLY PLACE!

We began by incensing the altar. You don't incense your car. You don't incense your house. You don't offer incense your place of work. But our place of worship, the presence of our God, sometimes we go over the top and we use incense to remind us that this space is special. It's a space in which we are connected so visibly and tangibly with our God and all the tangible signs of our connection of course are celebrated through sacraments.

Think of the number of people for example who have had water poured over their forehead when they were baptized in this parish church. Think of the number of those who have had oil put on their head through the sacrament of confirmation. Think of all those who came up in front of this altar and over the years as they began their married life together pledged unconditional love for one another. Think of the community gathering to celebrate the passage of so many members of this faith community to eternal life as we celebrate funerals. Think about the walls of this church and how many prayers have been heard in the past several years. It becomes incredible. It's obvious why after 25 years you've got to stop and say **"WOW, this calls for a celebration. This calls for a special marking because this is a Holy place. This is where the people of God gather."** And as we gather of course we are reminded constantly that this place is made holy by our God who lives within us and is made holy by our response of Faith. By how we live. By what we do. By how we witness to God's presence. and so much of our liturgy today talks about that faith and the quality of faith we require as faithful disciples of Jesus.

And I thought about sometimes how we get distorted notions of faith. And I was reminded of a story I've told a couple of times. Some of you may have heard this story before but pretend it's the first time. Because it's a good story. The story concerns a little old lady who phoned a pastor whose program was on the radio. And this pastor had one of those voices that just was so calm, soothing, it suggested great wisdom. It suggested kind of like a grandfather reaching out to all of his listeners. And everything he said was very reassuring and very affirming and was the type of voice that would melt fear in anybody's life. So this little old lady phones in one night to this pastor and she very obviously cried on the telephone. And this is going on over the airwaves. And she said to the pastor, "***I was born blind, and I've been blind all my life. I really don't mind being blind but I have some well-meaning friends who tell me that if I had more faith I could be healed***". And the pastor said, "***Well tell me, do you have one of those white-tipped canes that you sometimes see blind people carry?***" And she said, "***Oh yes, yes I do.***" The pastor then said, "***Well here's my advice for you to them. The next time somebody's says to you if you had enough faith you could be healed, hit them over the head with the cane. And then you tell them, if you had more faith THAT wouldn't hurt.***"

"INCREASE OUR FAITH"

Well today's Gospel begins with the Apostles saying to the Lord, "***Lord increase our faith.***" Increase our faith. Now it's very important to remember the context. Jesus has been talking to the disciples about the demands of faith. If they are going to follow him, they are supposed to be unconditional and unlimiting in granting forgiveness to those who offend them. Unconditional and unlimiting in granting forgiveness. Remember just a few verses ago Jesus said "***and if the same person sins against you 7 times a day and turns back to you 7 times and says 'I repent', you MUST forgive.***" Now in that context it's certainly understandable that the disciples would turn to the Lord and say "***increase my faith. How am I ever going to be able to do that?***" Well, on their own and in their own strength and power, of course, it was impossible and that's why Jesus then asked, "***if you have faith the size of the mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree 'BE UPROOTED AND BE PLANTED IN THE SEA' and it will obey you.***" Well that almost sounds like the person who said *well if you had faith you'd be healed of your blindness*, but really what they have to understand is that planting a tree in the sea, using words alone sounds impossible, and ridiculous ... and it's meant to ... because it's like a cartoon metaphor. Jesus is attempting to get them to risk doing difficult things. And the type of tree he is mentioning is HUMUNGUS in size. It's very large. It's got deep, deep roots. The mulberry tree growing in the Middle East is different from our Mulberry Tree and it would be impossible to pick it up and throw it into the sea. So he's using a very bizarre example to suggest if we have faith we too can perform miracles.

We must be ready to attempt what the worldly and the wise and the sophisticated laugh at. Now I'm going to give you an example of something that happened here in our city this past month, on September 13. I received an email from one of our young Catholic ladies who attends the University of Calgary and she wrote to me. She said to "my dismay when I had my first class on Monday, September 13th. It was far from what I thought it could be. Not even 10 minutes into the lecture, the teacher had thrown the bible on the ground. I don't mean he just dropped it, he tossed it on the ground. And he stepped on top of it with his foot saying it's just a book. I had never been so offended in my life. The teacher asked after he stepped off the bible and picking it

up if anyone was Christian in the class. Out of 60 or so kids, I was the only one to raise my hand. He asked me if what I did offended me. I told him yes. And he told me to explain why he offended me to the rest of the class. I did the best I could telling him it was the holy Bible, which is God's word and stepping on it is disrespecting not only to the Christian faith but God himself. He went on to tell the class it's just a book. I wanted to run from the class and drop it and never go back." Some of her fellow students thought that she was insane for challenge the professor. Now I want to say to you wasn't that like picking up and throwing the mulberry tree into the sea? Can you image the courage it took to do that? That's impossible. If you're smart and you want to pass that course, you don't challenge the professor. That's dumb. And yet it was the right thing to do. If you have faith, you will be willing to risk doing things that the worldly and the wise think are insane.

Let me give you another example. I heard this past week about a priest in Africa who deliberately committed a small crime. The reason he committed this crime was to get himself arrested and put in jail so that he could minister to those who needed him most. Now I thought to myself, this is insane. He got himself arrested, committed a crime so that he could go to jail to preach the Gospel in the jail. Now he was planting a tree in the sea. That's dumb. I admire his faith, he's got real faith, but if he were one of my priests I'd send him back to seminary because he's got bad theology. You never ever can do evil in order to bring about good. But he had faith and it's that kind of faith that's willing to take risks in this society in which we're living that Jesus talks about today. Because when Jesus in talking about faith with his Apostles, he is talking about sharing the power of God and even in small doses it can make quite a difference in our lives and in the lives of other people. That's why he talks about the mustard seed. He doesn't have to have faith the size of a mulberry tree, with just as small as the size of a mustard seed you can do great things however your faith just be linked with trust, with obedience, with commitment, the submission to God and the willingness to do whatever He commands.

Thanks be to God Jesus did not ask us to go around trying to cast mulberry trees into the sea. I could never do that. But I recognize that what Jesus wants is not so much the size of our faith but to let God's power act within us. If we let god's power act within us we can indeed move mountains. Forgiveness is a gift of god's grace. Innately and by nature we don't like to forgive and we probably shouldn't forgive but when God's grace is with us we become known as a people of reconciliation. A people of healing. A people who are willing to forgive even in situations in which the world says '*boy that is absolutely insane*'. Our faith is meant to be dynamic, alive and active and using us God will overcome great obstacles.

THE PARABLE OF THE UNDER-APPRECIATED SERVANT

The parable today about the underappreciated servant may seem to have no connection to faith and what I've been talking about but I think it really does. It teaches us that faith alone is not sufficient. Faith also requires action and this become very evident in the parable of the master who expects his servants to carry out his orders. So when the servant returns from working in the fields he also has housework to do. It's like many of you when you do your 32 or 40 hours at the office or the factory, you come home. You still have household tasks to do. And this servant is no exception. When he returns from the fields, he's still got the household chores to look

after, and he should not feel, the master that is, should not feel indebted to the servant because he does the household tasks. It's not like you can separate out those sorts of duties. We sometimes see people say "oh yeah, well I will live my faith in church, but once I've fulfilled my duty, the rest of the week, I don't have to do that". Or vice versa. "I'll live as a Christian in the world and I'll let people know I follow Christ. But I'm not going to bother going to church on Sunday". Woo, wait a minute. This is all one piece. It all fits together.

We are called to do our duty. We're expected to carry out the orders that Jesus gave us. We're servants of the Gospel as though we can never really feel that we have done enough. And there's no point in us grumbling and trying to explain we've been working hard for God all day and now we're tired so we're going to do our own thing. Service to God. We never have our own thing anymore. It's all God's work. We're called into the service of our God and one another. You are called as parishioners of this parish to live a common life, to be a community of faith. You are so gifted, you are so talented, you have so much natural ability, you've got so much faith but you've got to put it to work. If you put it to work with great confidence and let the power of God move in you then it will be like you're throwing mulberry trees into the ocean. You don't need a lot. You need the size of a mustard seed but you have to use it.

And the wonderful thing is that as we work for the Lord in faith, He works in us. He changes us. And he makes us holy. And that's ultimately what it's all about. To become Holy in the sight of God. Be a Holy people. Celebrate the intervention of God in your lives, in this parish facility, this parish family and prepare well. Be grateful for the future that you might live old, adventuresome, creative, risky lives of faith here in the community and in the broader context of our City here in Calgary and beyond. Be men and women of grace. And of course you have our lady as a very special patroness.

Be men and women of Grace.